

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Research

“An eminently traditional form of expression, folk art is often conceived of as unchanging and static. Nothing is farther from the truth. Though it changes in ways distinct from those of elite art, it is in constant transformation, a result both of artists perfecting their techniques and of adaptation to market demands” - (Bartra 2000).

1.1 The Prelude

Folk arts and handicrafts, as defined by critics and laymen are the two sides of the same coin having a thin sheet differentiating them from one another (Dorson, 1972; Sarma, 2009). The distinction lies in that handicrafts are repetitive, produced in series and representative of the utilitarian quality (Bartra, 2000). It emphasizes more manual dexterity than creativity; on the other hand, folk art is simply unique, more imaginative and hence more artistic (ibid). Folk art objects are the product of tradition in craftsmanship (Moore, 1989). Tradition, according to the founding father of Japanese folk art movement Yanagi Soetsu is the accumulation of experience and collective wisdom of many generations. It is the quintessence of cultural authenticity over a period of time (Meethen 2001 as cited in Proschel, 2012) constituting the forms, customs, or beliefs handed down orally through generations used widely by a culture (Parezo, 1981).

In almost every society of the world, traditionally, crafting has remained a basic activity. Crafts grew from utilitarian objects to objects of beauty and praise as a result of man’s endeavor to bring elegance in his surrounding of mere creature comfort and mundane needs (Chattopadhyay, 1984). Some objects became works of art and held special purposeful and ritualistic place while some creativities ensured high standard luxuriance of everyday life (ibid). Craft making has its own charted path of evolution through a period of time (Chuenrudeemoil, et al. 2012). At times, it evolves due to the artists’ desire of self-satisfaction, cultural expression, aesthetics and creativity and a desire to make something which is pleasing (Parezo, 1981). More so, artistic discourses arise when artisans want to reposition their importance and presence in the changing milieu of the society (Tolentino, Jr. 2012). There are examples of well

known crafts like the Kokeshi doll of Japan which underwent distinctive classification in style as artists tended towards developing ‘one of a kind’ doll (McDowell, 2011). Traditional forms of expression like folk arts though conceived as static and unchanging, in reality, undergoes constant transformation (Bartra, 2000). This is because artisans always tend to perfect their techniques or often inconspicuously give into market demand (ibid).

Prior to the advent of commercialization, community craftsmen created artefacts for utilitarian and religious needs (Lucas, 2008; Parezo, 1981). The identity of a handicraft relied in its nature and usage. However, in a transitioning society, traditional crafts previously satisfying the everyday needs of the village inhabitants is no longer needed; the decline is connected with economic progress (Mokras-Grabowska, 2013). The once small and independent communities with subsistence economies get integrated with the larger societies in cash and market economies (Parezo, 1982). As soon as opportunity to sustain economically through his art opened, handicraft no more remained a mere utilitarian object. The artist perfected his techniques while the artisan adapted to the emerging market demands. Craft production became especially a part while trying to eke out some form of existence (ibid). Craft became the easiest items of exchange as soon as integration with the cash economy took place and communities started trading their resources against other objects (Berma, 1996). According to Marx (1971), ‘every product of labour’, be it crafts, ‘in all states of society, has a use value; but it is only at a definite historical epoch in a society’s development that such a product becomes a commodity’.

‘Commoditization’, the process of transformation of craft into a commodity, thus ‘lies at the complex intersection of temporal, cultural and social factors’ (Appadurai, 1986; 1994). The economically poorer group starts producing its crafts for the society which demands its products (Parezo, 1981). Crafts, which were earlier, exchanged by non-monetary modes of valuation, what Firth calls as ‘exchange by private treaty’ (Appadurai, 1994), turns itself into commodity having an economic value, due to the play of market forces (Ondrusova, 2004), to fit the requirements of ‘commodity candidacy’ (Appadurai, 1986). This may result in metamorphosing a craft originally intended for internal uses in a community to a commodity with some value to other users. ‘Commodities by metamorphosis’ is one of the terms delivered by Jacques Maquet in 1971 to divide the aesthetic productions wherein things intended for other

uses are modified into commodities (as cited in Appadurai, 1986). Another term coined by Marquet is ‘commodities by diversion’ where commoditization of objects is intensified by diverting everyday objects from their ‘customary circuits’ through further enhancement in its value and aesthetics (as cited in Appadurai, 1986). In similar lines, Guatemala’s indigenous apparel makers modified and re-contextualized their traditional clothing to non-traditional one for the western market to stay afloat in the ‘regimes of value’ (Thomas, 2009). Crafts, this way, enter the circuit of economic exchange evaluated in terms of its exchange value. The wheels of commercialization are thus set in motion.

1.2 The Background to the Research

Stylistic changes in motifs, designs, colors, raw materials are part of commercial dynamics of crafts as artisans increasingly start changing functional dimensions of utilitarian and religious objects to new uses for new categories of customers.

1.2.1 Commercialization and Modification in Crafts

As crafts become part of economic exchanges, stylistic modifications are often initiated during commercialization. Stylistic Modification in craft objects are observed in motifs and designs (Barnett, 2009), the shape and size of the object (Flechsigg, 2004; Parezo, 1982), the functional dimensions of the crafts (Gill, et al. 2012) and manipulation in raw materials (Chartniyom, 2013; Jones, 1973; Nugraha, 2010). Changes in motifs and shapes are observed in Cherokee baskets of Oklahoma in US (Hill, 1997), *dasun* basketry of Malaysia (Chua, 2006) and the African basket works (Nettleton, 2010) in the form of increased or sparse decoration and modern designs other than the indigenous motifs. Designs in *zulu* baskets of South Africa were almost absent when made for rural customers which later became sophisticated to suit new functional needs of western homes (Terry and Cunningham, 1993). Similarly, traditional textiles like *jok* fabrics of Tai community of Thailand (Chunthone, 2013), *kebaya* dress and *lukisan* batik of Indonesia (Tolentino Jr, 2012), Ban Bu bronze craft of Bangkok (Chartniyom, 2013), etc. were put to several new functional uses through modification. Changes are seen in the use of raw materials in the Teotilian textiles of Oaxaca as weavers started using various dyestuffs and synthetic yarns (Popelka and Litrell, 1991). Huichol artisans of Mexico also replaced natural fiber with synthetic and colorful yarns (Berkin, 2009). Basketry works saw the use of imported materials

(Nettleton, 2010). Artisans started utilizing imported wool in Tibetan carpets known as *thangkas* (Odegaard, 1987; O'Neill, 1997) as its demand grew in foreign markets. In Indian context too, many such examples of stylistic changes are noticed. Hauser (2002) and Jefferson (2014) studied the commercialization related modifications in scrolls of West Bengal and identified changes in painting patterns, use of colors, sizes and functionality of the scrolls. Likewise, *pattachitra* of Orissa reflects modernity due to use of new raw materials like *tasar* silk (Tripathy, 1998), abundance in color which basically remained in primary hues earlier, replication of the paintings on new functional items like cards and change in the story lines of the paintings from mythological to modern subjects. *Phulkari* craft of Punjab (Maskiel, 1999, 2002), *madhubani* (Neel, 2011) are all examples of crafts that underwent stylistic transformation due to commercialization.

1.2.2 Clientele and Craft

In general terms, commercialization of handicrafts according to Roy (1999) refers to a shift away of the production of crafts from one's own use to its production as gifts and tributes for others, or for the market, especially the non-local markets and long distance ones. More often, it is related to the change in the producer and consumer behaviour and leading to the creation of institutions and infrastructure which aids the shifts (ibid). However, the process of commercialization of crafts is not as simple as it sounds. Evolving social and market systems pull artisans into the process wherein crafts undergo modification (Lucas, 2008). Crafts once made to fulfill utilitarian need, changes in forms, functions, meanings and symbolisms with its exposure to outside world (Swanson and Timothy, 2012). In 1976, Graburn mentioned that craftsmen produce crafts initially for local consumption only, what he termed as 'internal audience'. But the forces bringing the change can be spontaneous as well as induced (Sarma, 2009). Induced changes take place as a result of contact with other groups and systems, with its outcome depending on the intensity of the contact (ibid). Popelka (1989) identified four types of craft producer-entrepreneurs; externally oriented mass producers who orient towards the need of non-traditional clients, internally oriented local showroom producers, outdoor market producers who utilize traditional markets for their craft sales, and design entrepreneurs with creative expression. Later, she explains the three periods during which these producers changed or modified the products. In the initial stage at the very onset of tourists'

inflow, product experimentation was used to identify handcrafts for tourists' acceptance; the second stage was of product expansion wherein identified product 'the *tapetas*' were made with many new designs and materials from outside the Mexican culture; in the third period extending from the late 1970s, the production was expanded to commercial exports.

Literature is abundant with research suggesting the influence of contacts with outsiders like tourists which sets the stage for modification in crafts. Graburn (1984) states that the transition from functional items to commercial objects occurs when craft communities encounter tourists and outsiders ready to buy arts embedded with tradition. Jeremy Boissevain notes the emergence of flourishing handicraft sector with the development of tourism in Malta (1977). Often for commercial purposes, the Tileño artisans of Mexico categorize their craft as commercial pieces, traditional pieces and fine pieces made along different lines of stylistic or visual characteristics (Cant, 2012). According to Cant, tourism forms an important background which influences artisans' creativity through commodified personas; nevertheless created within the ambit of historical structure but at the same time conforming to the client's expectation for a consumable craft object. In Oaxaca, Mexico carvers often create 'antique' wood objects for tourists that resemble religious artifacts of the indigenous communities (Brulotte, 2012). Crafts, according to researchers, largely flourish in tourism and leisure markets (Howkins, 2007; Whery, 2008 as cited in Chudasri et al. 2012).

While on the other hand, studies also suggest changes in crafts taking place due to the involvement of other groups and agencies that introduce their expertise to help artisans produce crafts for larger external markets like exports. The earliest of the works are of Thomas (1969) on modification of Navajo weaving and silverwork accruing to different types of contacts viz. contact of outsiders, directed programs, etc. In one case, Thomas identified situations where traders encouraged weavers to thicken their blankets to make it suitable as floor carpets. Some even brought their own designs and special forms to help Navajo artisans' replicate the same in produced rugs (ibid). William (1976) documented the development of aboriginal artefact trade at Yirrkala under several mission stations for inexpensive objects like small carvings and suitcase size bark paintings. In another foremost work, Jules-Rosette identified the ways in which crafts person make a shift to commercialization (1984, as cited in

Popelka, 1989). Jules-Rosette developed a framework to highlight the direct and the indirect communications between the consumers and the artisans. Both exchanges provided consumer feedback to the producer to help him modify and develop crafts palatable to consumers. While in the former producer and consumers negotiated one-on-one, in the latter, the middleman and vendors acted as a translator. Likewise, Samoan crafts changed to match the commercial pursuits of missionaries and traders in earlier stages and at later stages modified under local consumers and touristic influences (Lucas, 2008). Changes are, thus, not instantaneous but involve a long time and a systematic process (Roy, 1994), but still, is an indispensable part when folk arts get commoditized for economic transactions (Cohen, 1996 as cited in Ballengee-Morris, 2002).

The process of modification in crafts due to its commercialization, at large, is studied in detail by Prof. Erik Cohen (1989a). He derived a framework involving commercialization and hence, modification of crafts particularly in reference to the crafts of Thailand. Cohen established a basis to understand the process of commercialization based on two factors i.e. vitality of the local ethnic culture and the source of initiative. Based on the source of initiative he divided commercialization into spontaneous and sponsored types. Based on the vitality of culture he classified commercialization into complementary, substitutive, encroaching and rehabilitative. The first two were categorized as spontaneous commercialization; initiated by local people in response to perceived new opportunities and the last two as sponsored; induced by external agency, for purely commercial or for humanitarian reasons. In complementary and encroaching types, the culture prior to the outset of commercialization is vital and flourishing. The difference in the two is that in the first one the craftsmen produce crafts for use by local population or what is called 'internal audience' (Graburn, 1976) and in the later, external sponsoring agency employs native craftsmen to produce items for an external market or 'indirect tourism' (Aspelin, 1977) market which is otherwise not accessible to the native population.

In substitutive and rehabilitative ones, the local crafts sees deterioration and general decline even leading to disappearance as craftsmen abandon their skill due to some external forces like prohibition on production and penetration of cheap mechanized substitutes. In the former one, remaining craftsmen again produce the half-forgotten

craft spontaneously leading to new crafts based on an old craft whereas in later case external agency takes up the responsibility to revive external markets. Cohen identified this to be the most common type of massive commercialization of ethnic craft tending towards routinization of production and standardization of wares. He also discussed the consequences of such commercialization on the identity of the ethnic people relative to their economy, society and culture. He makes observations that encroaching commercialization leads to decline of cultural significance among craftsmen due to economic gains but at the same time complementary, substitutive and rehabilitative commercialization help in revitalizing the craft. He also observes how new crafts can become a new 'cultural maker' which sometimes become reintegrated into the local culture and also how crafts meant for external public becomes a medium of communication for the otherwise cut off craftsmen from the external market.

With commercialization occurs a stylistic change in crafts. This has been described in Cohen's article (1983) and his book (2000), "The commercialized crafts of Thailand-Hill tribes and lowland villages". He identified four principal variables to analyze processes of stylistic change in arts and crafts under conditions of commercialization. These are:

1. **Perpetuation vs. Innovation:** In the first case artisans tend merely to reproduce the stylistic elements prevalent at the 'base-line' while in the second artisans introduce new elements into their work.
2. **Orthogenesis Vs. Heterogenesis** (adapted from Redfield and Singer(1969) as cited by Cohen (2000)): Orthogenesis refers to whether artisans merely continue to adapt or elaborate stylistic elements inherent in the style at the base-line and heterogenesis refers to the situation when artisans tend to introduce radically new stylistic elements, unrelated to the style of the base-line, or to the artisans' elements, unrelated to the style of the base-line, or to the artisans' broader cultural traditions.
3. **Internal Vs. External Audience** (adapted from Graburn (1976) as cited by Cohen, 2000): The first variable relates to internal public or audience who share the cultural background of the artisans while the second relates to external public or

audience who are unfamiliar with the artisans' culture. These audiences tend to influence the production of crafts differently in an artisan community.

4. **Spontaneous vs. sponsored production:** In the first case, artisans commercialize and hence bring changes in their products on their own initiative, whereas in the second, external agents like NGO, government agencies or private entrepreneurs commercialize and hence modifies or influence the modification of the products.

Based on Cohen's work, Marckwick (2001) also classified the commercialization of the traditional crafts of Malta. She found that spontaneous commercialization of still vital Maltese pottery, lace works and filigree jewellery took place as a result of the growth of tourism industry in Malta in the 1970s. She found an altogether different dynamic in sponsored commercialization introduced by foreign entrepreneurs. Handicrafts like glassware, soft toys and hand prints exclusively new to Maltese islands were by these agents developed in response to tourism (ibid). Likewise, Reynolds (2011) studied the commercialization of Tibetan *Thangkas* and found that commercialization of the *thangkas* cannot be perfectly fit into the process described by Cohen but the process is rather a complicated one due to its complex process of production, distribution and promotion. *Thangkas* does not exhibit any of the process mentioned by Cohen in toto, but represents portions of rehabilitative, complementary and encroaching forms, subject to the production and distribution pattern followed by the artisans of Rebgong in Tibet (Reynolds, 2011). This account opens up a debate whether earlier models on craft commercialization can fit the commercial dynamics of every place in toto.

1.2.3 The Socio-Economic Impact of Commercialization of Crafts and Artisans

Commercialization of crafts seems to help artisan families improve their living standards. Production of artefacts modified according to customer requirements provides more income opportunities. Examples of craft commercialization and socio-economic benefits of artisan communities are found in the works by Connelly-Kirch (1982), Sullivan, (2013), Mbaiwa and Darkoh (2009), etc. It is found in literature that commercialization of crafts open up opportunities for women to participate. Craft commoditization of the Quecha speaking community of Bolivia helped women increase their standards of living (Woofter, 2011). Innovative products and ornamented items in silk are also found to yield higher income to the artisans

(Baishya, 1986). Commercialization of crafts and socio-economic status of artisans are very much related to each other and hence need further exploration. Socio-economic impacts of commercialization range from increased female participation to enhanced social statuses (Gjerald, 2005) which are necessary to be studied in regions where craft commercialization takes place.

1.3 The Focus of the Research

Assam has many beautiful crafts and craft producing regions found across its length and breadth. In many books and gazettes on history of Assam (Allen, 1905; Gait 1908; Choudhury, 1959; Das, 1968; Datta, 1973; DasGupta, 1982; Goswami, 2005; Sarma, 2009), few pages on handicrafts are always presented as references to the material culture of the state. Historical and anthropological studies done by eminent researchers presented the glorious art and crafts tradition in many different ways. These previous studies, however, have tended to describe crafts from various places of Assam from the perspective of its indigenous history and anthropology (Sarma, 1978; Khadria, 1992; Medhi, 1992), process and stages of production of crafts (Sarmah, 2001), commerce, marketing (Sarma, 2008; Sah, 2011b; Sahay, 2015) and socio-economic dimensions of craftsmen communities (Medhi, et al. 2012). Some hints on changes in crafts of Assam are often reflected in these studies. However, a comprehensive understanding of stylistic modifications in crafts is yet not available with reference to the crafts of Assam, especially the crafts of Brahmaputra valley, except for a study by Sarma (2016).

This study examines the modifications taking place in crafts due to commercialization from perspective of design, materials, commerce, clientele, variations in size, shape, structure, form, functionality, etc. Its aim is to provide a detailed analysis and description of changes taking place in the crafts of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. This study brings the change process to the level of craft, craftsmen, customers and other stakeholders such as intermediaries and external agencies. It is also an attempt to understand the socio-economic conditions of artisans engaged in the commercial practice of the crafts.

1.4 The Structure of the Thesis

The remainder of this dissertation consists of eight chapters, out of which, the succeeding **Chapter Two** discusses a range of literature and reviews various concepts like, commoditization or commodification of crafts, the reasons for modification and commoditization of crafts, the influence of tourism as well as indirect tourism and the role played by mediators in the commercialization process of the crafts. This extensive literature is used to think about how commercialization of crafts might have taken place in the context of crafts of Assam. It also explores the concept of sustainability of the crafts from the viewpoints of previous studies so as to relate it with the present scenario of crafts in Assam. These glimpses from earlier studies are necessary because the above objectives can only be adequately considered against the ambit of debates and deliberations that characterized the thinking of ‘commercialization of crafts’. Some working definitions for the present study are also discussed in this chapter.

In **Chapter Three**, an in-depth reference to the historical legacy of the craft culture of the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam and its trade and commerce in earlier times is provided. It simply draws a picture of the thriving crafts of the region and its importance in the cultural and social life of the people. Based on the literature presented in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, problem statement for the research is defined and presented in **Chapter Four** with the scope and nature of the study as well as limitations of the work. **Chapter Five** outlines the research design, the decision to apply qualitative as well as quantitative epistemology as a strategy, and methods used. The use of qualitative tools like oral history, informal interviews as well as focus group interviews are described in detail along with quantitative tools like questionnaire and schedules. The succeeding chapters following chapter five forms the core of the research. **Chapter Six, Seven, Eight, Nine** and **Ten** theorize the transformation in the Pottery & Terracotta, Brass & Bell Metal, Bamboo, *Eri* and *Pat & Muga* crafts respectively. The process of transformation due to commercialization of the crafts is discussed with photographic illustrations documented through field data. Each of the crafts taken in the study is analyzed based on the modification undergone related to change in clientele, form and style, utility, etc. which fulfills the set objectives of the study. Further, after having an investigation into the commercial

dynamics of crafts, the socio-economic status of the artisans engaged in the commercialization is discussed in **Chapter Eleven**. In **Chapter Twelve**, the analysis of the approaches used for objective three are presented. The result of the survey undertaken on tourists as well as opinions generated from focus group interviews and informal interviews with various respondents are discussed herein. **Chapter Thirteen** discusses the entire findings of the study. Later, drawing upon the results of the study from the perspectives of the artefacts and artisans', **Chapter Fourteen** presents suggestions for sustainable commercialization of the crafts. **Chapter Fifteen** is a concluding chapter which finally sums up the entire thesis and forwards the contribution of the study to the body of knowledge and the future research scope.

1.5 Wrapping up the Chapter

This chapter briefly discussed the research background and the rationale of the study. Over the years, traditional wealth of communities across the world has changed due to varied circumstances of which economic opportunism among the most visible setting in motion the wheels of commercialization. This is no less true in the case of the crafts of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. However, the dynamics of the process and the process itself needs in-depth exploration which still is an uncharted trajectory calling for attention. In light of this, Assam and its craft sector makes an excellent stage on which questions can be made and answers sought so as to gauge the survival and revival of the present craft sector of Assam.